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AUTHOR Jacobson, Vivienne
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ABSTRACT

Identification and programing are central topics in the discussion of gifted learning disabled (LD) students. Characteristics of gifted LD students are described, including talent in the creative arts. Reasons for overlooking this population are noted, including their ability to compensate for their problems. The degree of giftedness and of learning disability, together with the type of LD and the student's personality characteristics are considered. Problems in serving gifted LD students in the resource room are described, including negative effects on the student's self concept. Suggestions are offered for identification, curriculum, the individualized education program, minimalized failure, student-teacher relationships, and the role of the parents. (CL)

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The Gifted/Learning Disabled

by

Vivienne Jacobson, Ph. D.
Associate Professor, Education
Purdue University Calumet

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THE GIFTED/LEARNING DISABLED

Who Are They?

There are many bright children sitting in regular classrooms, getting by, working at grade level but slowly "winding down" in interest, in skill development, in motivation and in ability to reach their potential.

There are also many bright children working in resource rooms for the learning disabled. In this setting, they are plodding through repetitive drills, associating with youngsters with marginal ability, and acquiring a self-image that is detrimental to their growth and development.

In these two settings, the regular classroom and the resource room, will be found significant numbers of these children - the gifted/learning disabled who have simultaneously very high intelligence and/or some very special academic talents, in addition to a learning disability in some very important area such as reading, writing, perceptual skills or mathematics.

The area of the gifted learning disabled is relatively uncharted territory (Meisgeir, 1978) and there are very few programs in the country which address their specific needs. Two of the oldest and most successful are in California (Maker, 1977) and these deal primarily with gifted underachievers of all types.

Who are the gifted? The present U.S. Office of Education definition states:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services in order to realize their contributions to self and society.

Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential in any of the following areas:

1. General intellectual ability
2. Specific academic aptitude
3. Creative or productive thinking
4. Leadership ability
5. Visual and performing arts
6. Psychomotor ability

Learning disabilities, according to the most recently developed and widely accepted definition

"is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities..." (Hamill, Leigh, McNuff & Larsen, 1981).

These two definitions are so broad and so amorphous that there is widespread disagreement about their accuracy. But there is agreement about a degree of overlap. Many learning disabled children have high ability, and some gifted children are identified early as having specific learning problems.

For purposes of this discussion we will concentrate on children in the first three of the categories of gifted: those with general or specific intellectual ability, and those with an unusual degree of creativity. These are the areas most often addressed in schools.

Gifted children with learning disabilities often demonstrate perceptual problems, poor motor skills and memory difficulties. How then do we know they are gifted? Formally, because of their performance on individual intelligence tests, where they may show extremely high scores in some of the subtests, though the wide scatter of scores tends to lower their overall score. Informally, because of teacher and parent recommendations. Typically these note excellent verbal skills, advanced developmental milestones, good conceptual or problem solving skills, high creativity or excellent memory. (Haker, 1977)

The proportion of gifted learning disabled in the general population is not high, but in a study of over 5000 children in L.D. classes, Mauser (1979) found 2.3 per cent with over 120 IQ. With this one restrictive measure of giftedness, then, a significant number was discovered.

Most teachers of either group can produce "amazing case histories that come to the attention of anyone gathering data in this relatively uncharted territory". (Meisgeier, Meisgeier, Werblo, 1978, p. 84). In one study of these children, the authors state, "Many of these uneven gifted youngsters exhibited talents in art, music, poetry, electronics, business and the sciences. For example, one child was building computer boards by age 10, another breeds ants and tropical fish and teaches the pertinent biological topics to his class, and a third is the number one high school debater in his freshman year although he has severe writing and spelling disabilities," (Schiff, Kaufman & Kaufman, 1981, p. 402).

Many gifted learning disabled people are highly talented in the creative arts (photography, music, dance, art and design). These talents may be in part inherent, and consequently developed to a high degree to compensate for difficulties in the sequential skills required for more traditional academic subjects. (Many biographies of geniuses or highly talented persons tell of their school difficulties which may or may not have been due to learning disabilities). Studies of learning disabled populations have shown that performance scores are often significantly above the verbal, but this was not corroborated by a recent study of learning disabled gifted children. In this study, although the group had an extremely high scatter of scores on the WISC (showing more variability than either learning disabled or normal) the children showed unusual strength in verbal comprehension and conceptualizing. (Schiff, Kaufman and Kaufman, 1981).

In studies of creativity using the Torrance Tests of Creativity and other formal measures, most have found no difference between the LD and non-LD populations. Gifted LD youngsters in one pilot study did well in these measures, though not exceptionally so. (Ellis-Schwabe, Conroy, 1983)

There are very few programs that adequately serve this "doubly special" group. Maker (1977) gives some of the background for the apparent neglect of gifted children with handicaps. She found that only a few authors have dealt with what she calls "special talents and defects". Among these are Mary H. Hecker (1969), Goertzel & Goertzel (1962), and Baker (1970) who studied talented and/or special people in depth and described each in terms of specific strengths and weaknesses.

Gifted LD children are overlooked primarily because they are functioning at grade level and so are not demonstrably in need of services. Teachers have little reason to refer a child who is doing satisfactory work. It is often only if he demonstrates outstanding ability in some area, and is marginal in basic skills that he might be referred for special help. Disruptive children are referred more often than quiet ones; behavior is more disquieting to a teacher than marginal academic skills. (Ysseldyke, 1983) So the quiet, gifted child who does what is expected of him does not get the attention and services he needs.

Special education teachers are likely to overlook the special gifts of a learning disabled youngster, or to see these areas of strength only in terms of usefulness in remediating the weakness - as a motivator or source of pride. These children would rarely be referred for a gifted program because of their academic difficulties.

Another cause of difficulty in identification is connected to personality traits. Inattentiveness, restlessness, lack of social skills, perseverance are often a concomitant part of the problem of learning disabilities. These traits interfere with the development of unusual abilities, particularly in classrooms as they are presently organized. A restless eager student is not allowed to work independently on concrete problems - he is often forced to sit still, and hence becomes more frustrated, more inattentive and less able to cope.

Gifted children can overcome their problems and reach high levels of achievement through compensation. Their ability to compensate depends on several factors:

1. The extent of their giftedness
2. The extent or degree of their learning disabilities
3. The area in which they are learning disabled
4. Their personality characteristics

The Extent of Giftedness

The brighter the child, the greater his ability to compensate. Often the highly intelligent child sees many alternatives, and can come up with several viable solutions to a problem. Thus, if he has a severe reversal problem, he will remediate his problem by a technique that is unique and satisfying to him. The child who is creative will be able to complete assignments by means that are both interesting and novel: he might use drawing or tape a verbal essay when writing is asked for. These alternatives must be accepted by a knowledgeable and caring teacher who understands the child.

The Degree of Learning Disability

The child with a severe reading disability will be at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to acquiring information in the subject areas which interest him. Whereas a mild reading problem may be compensated for or remediated, a severe disability will not so easily be circumvented.

Area of Learning Disability

If written expression, spelling or math is the area of major difficulty a gifted child may still learn and achieve commensurate with his ability. A severe reading problem is usually debilitating to general progress. It is true, however, that severely reading disabled youngsters have learned to overcome their difficulty. This requires intensive appropriate teaching, and demands intense dedication and perseverance from the student.

Personality Characteristics

This is an area of crucial importance in predicting the achievement of the gifted learning disabled in school and life in general. Tannenbaum (1983) notes that initiative, enthusiasm, willingness, and ability to do sustained work have been found characteristic of gifted groups in this country and others. Bernal (1974) and Chen & Goon (1976) examined different minorities, and found these characteristics as indicative of high achievement as in the majority culture. If children with learning disabilities are seen as a minority, it is possible to find those young children with these characteristics, and nurture their growth while remediating their perceptual problems.

In an account of her life as a gifted learning disabled person, Eileen Simpson (1979), who later became an extremely successful author and psychotherapist, remembers that despite her excellent work habits, her perseverance, and her high abilities in many areas, she was constantly being scolded for laziness, for lack of attention, for stubbornness. Not until her family and the school recognized her disability could she pursue her many interests in the arts, writing and social sciences without feelings of inadequacy and shame.

When children's needs are not met, their negative, self-destructive behavior exacerbates the problem: failure breeds negativism which breeds more rejection. Gifted children often yearn for peer relationships and welcome group activities with other children of their intellectual caliber. But negative, noncooperative behavior is quickly rejected, and the child who exhibits this behavior is isolated or ostracized. So children with social behavior deficits as a result of learning disabilities learn to cope by various nonproductive means: de-valuing others, avoidance, absenteeism, chronic complaining, projection of blame, escape into daydreaming or generalized hatred of school (Whitmore, 1980)

These children are often dismissed from programs for the gifted because of their noncooperation. So the difficulty is compounded: the unmet needs escalate.

Present Programs

Problems of the Resource Room

This is now the most prevalent program model used for remediation of learning disabilities of moderate severity (Wiederholt, Hammill and Brown, 1978). In many schools, the room is multicategorical and serves students who are mildly mentally or emotionally handicapped at the same time. In this room, there is an emphasis on structure, on drill, and on the teaching of basic skills in a step-by-step hierarchy, with much repetition and "multiple channel" teaching, using auditory, visual and tactile methods.

This teaching has proved to be effective for many learning disabled children, but it may not be appropriate for one with a very high intelligence. (One must generalize with great caution since each child has a unique collection of traits, and descriptions of categories such as the "gifted learning disabled" are at best tenuous).

These remedial methods may be inappropriate because most highly intelligent youngsters are typically perceptive, and very sensitive, and they recognize that the work they're doing is beneath their capabilities. They are well aware that the level of their intelligence is uncharacteristic of the class, and the stigma of being placed in the group often proves devastating to a bright, sensitive child.

The imagination, creativity and fantasy world of the gifted child is often rich and exciting. These young people are quickly bored by routine classroom experiences and may be especially upset by repetitive drills which do not provide for their own elaborate compensatory abilities.

Another problem of the resource room for the gifted/l.d. student is that it pulls him out of the regular classroom which may offer more stimulating activities. The child may be missing science or social studies or math, which he enjoys, in order to do more drills to remediate his specific weaknesses.

Gifted Programs

Criteria for entering these programs usually involve achievement test scores and teacher recommendations. For the reasons discussed, gifted learning disabled students, because of their academic and/or social problems often do not gain admission. There have been no studies involving this group's performance in special programs for gifted, and very few strong evaluative studies of gifted programs in general.

Suggestions for the Future

Identification

Since it is important to identify children with learning disabilities early, there are more kindergarten screening programs being initiated each year. It has been shown that parents are an important resource in identifying giftedness in their children, especially in the early years (Jacob,

1971, Ciha, Harris, Hoffman & Potter, 1974). During kindergarten screening, parents should be asked a set of questions about the child's behavior which might indicate special potential. If it is found that there are "lagging abilities" or signs of learning disability, the child's particular strengths might also be identified. This would assist the teachers in developing a program that would build and develop special talents while remediating in areas of need.

Teachers that see children every day, and that are sensitive to their individual abilities can also be a reliable source of identification, particularly in areas where testing does not produce reliable results. Young children with poor motor skills, for example, may not perform well on paper and pencil tests, yet in verbal reasoning, creativity and original thought, they may be extremely talented. It is important for teachers to be trained in the discrimination of special talents.

Many studies of early identification of learning disabilities by kindergarten teachers have shown the superiority of teacher judgment over any other (written) measures. Keogh & Smith (1970) and Fesback, Adelman & Fuller (1977) showed a high predictive ability of checklists completed by kindergarten teachers after completion of the school year. These checklists should be redesigned to include indicators of special gifts or talents.

Curriculum

Many gifted learning disabled children will remain in regular classrooms, and will not need to be referred for special services (Ysseldyke, 1983). The curriculum for these children will be undergoing change as the current interest in schools influences all curriculum. One of the most widely discussed plans for change is outlined in "The Paideia Proposal" by Mortimer Adler (1982). In this erudite discussion of strengthening the curriculum, Adler proposes one track only, a heavy concentration on math, science and humanities with little or no provision for individual differences. Although adoption of this proposal nationally would prove disastrous for children with special needs unless adaptations were made in presentation and learning experiences, a thoughtful reading of the proposal leads to the conclusion that the ideas for content are sound - that gifted children would thrive on the demanding curriculum. But those with learning disabilities, who understand and can cope with the content would need specialized techniques of interaction and evaluation. High level thinking skills must be incorporated into subject areas.

As schools stand today, gifted programs are continuing to expand to include creative thinking, concrete problem solving, acceleration when appropriate and mentors, among other techniques. Learning disabled students can be successful in these classes with special provisions made for their areas of weakness: individual learning plans should be made, with goals established for each child. This corresponds to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) which is required for all handicapped children.

The IEP

This technique of prescribing individual goals and methods for each child is the most appropriate, but too often the plan is made out hastily to meet the federal requirements. Often the IEP remains unused in children's folders while routine educational techniques are used for children with varying needs. Teachers complain of the paper work, and try to simplify it by using "canned" goals and techniques. This is the reason many learning disabled students' programs are inappropriate, and why progress is seldom maximal.

The IEP for gifted learning disabled children should include acceleration, independent study, pullout programs, mentors or in-class grouping. The learning disabilities should be noted, and adjustments made for the problems. A mentor might be combined with a reader or peer tutor. An advanced placement course in mathematics might be prescribed in addition to remedial reading class. Only when the two needs are dealt with simultaneously can a workable, effective plan be conceived. This necessitates a case conference which includes the specialists in gifted and learning disabled, who working together with the regular class teacher can devise an appropriate program.

Minimizing Failure

Cotter (1967) found that first grade failure was particularly damaging to students, a finding borne out by Whitmore in the model program for gifted underachievers (1983). In addition to academics, it is imperative that early emotional support be made available to children who show signs of

failure. Counseling, both individual and in groups, is the most commonly prescribed treatment for these children. Results have been mixed (Gallagher, 1975). But children know what they want. In one study they specified their desires for interactive, interesting instruction, a flexible classroom, a noncompetitive atmosphere and a warm and skillful teacher who understands and respects their individuality.

Emotional aspects of school failure must be addressed. Whitmore outlined various methods that worked with gifted underachievers. Since many learning disabled students show severe social and emotional problems, a major part of remediation should address this area. Each aspect of socialization and emotional health must be carefully considered, and a major goal should be to "develop more realistic perceptions of self, school and life" (Whitmore, p. 213).

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

The personality, skills and training of teachers are the basic ingredients of successful programming for these children. Teachers who are threatened by gifted children, impatient with lack of success, unskilled in handling behavioral difficulties will find these gifted learning disabled a major challenge. A teacher of the gifted requires the same qualities that all good teachers demonstrate. Witty (1971) listed these qualities:

1. possesses an understanding of self
2. possesses an understanding of giftedness
3. is a facilitator of learning
4. provides challenge rather than pressure
5. is concerned with the process as well as the product of learning

6. provides feedback rather than judgment
7. provides alternative learning strategies
8. establishes a classroom environment which promotes self-esteem and offers safety for creativity and risk taking

The problem with a multi-faceted program is that no one adult is a prime contact or support for the student. A counselor or homeroom teacher, a special educator or teacher of the gifted may be the assigned "prime adult". This person may help coordinate the program, provide counseling and support and follow the progress of the child.

Role of Parents

Parents of gifted learning disabled youngsters should provide the same caring, nurturing educationally rich environment that is best for all children. Gifted children have been shown to blossom with encouragement from close, intellectually stimulating parents who have high expectations for behavior and self-discipline. (Bloom, 1983)

Parents who demonstrate these characteristics will probably be baffled by learning disabilities as they first become evident in their gifted children. Once they are made aware of the facts surrounding this developmental disorder, they will need to work with the school specialist in deciding how to best help the child. Sometimes tutoring is helpful; often supervision and help with homework is required. Many parents provide assistance by reading to the child or helping him organize and present material in ways that are most comfortable for him.

In many cases, reports can be made orally, if writing is a problem. Parents can be instrumental in ensuring that tests in school may be administered orally if necessary and appropriate. This alone will enable the bright child to show what he has learned.

Parental support is essential to the child throughout the school years. Patient understanding of the problem and nurturing of the giftedness will help lessen the damage to the self-concept that occurs if the child has to struggle to achieve. Open communication about the problems and solutions will help the child compensate.

Summary and Conclusions

There are many stories about learning disabled men of eminence; Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, and Woodrow Wilson are often mentioned. Giftedness and learning disabilities do occur together. Whether or not the child will grow up to achieve, to lead a fulfilling, intellectually exciting life, and to make a contribution to his world depends on many things. Foremost among these are supportive, involved parents, a personality that can face and overcome obstacles, and a school program which is geared to his individual needs.

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